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ABSTRACT

A system for teaching advanced English as second language students how to use "a," "an," and "the" in writing is described. In deciding whether to use a definite or indefinite article, the student is taught to ask three questions about the context and nature of the noun: (1) has it been mentioned before in the composition, (2) is there anything definite right after the noun, and (3) is there only one in existence (as in "the earth"). The noun requires a definite article if any of these questions is answered in the affirmative. If all of the questions are answered in the negative, the learner must then consider whether the noun in question is a count noun and whether it is singular. A singular count noun requires no article. A test of the questioning system on native speakers of English yielded disagreement on which article to use in some cases but demonstrated that context and prior knowledge make a difference in debatable areas. The system can help English as second language speakers to define their own context and to arrive at one of the correct uses of articles in each case. Sample exercises are appended. (RW)

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SHOULD I WRITE A OR THE?

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A Presentation
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November 6, 1982

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SHOULD I WRITE A OR THE?

by
Judith Wrase

I would like to share with you an idea or rather a system that occurred to me in primitive form during class one day. Over a few semesters the system has developed as a way of helping advanced ESL students in writing classes handle the article a, an, and the.

I include articles as part of the revision of writing. Using articles needs to be taught: for one reason, they have meaning in English; second, mistakes stand out and cause misreading and confusion. However, I feel quite strongly that too much worry too early about which article goes where is not productive in writing.

Writing is a process rather than only a final product to be handed in for the red pen. I see writing as a growing, living, developing process that begins with prewriting, or exploring what to say. To encourage exploration of ideas, I ask the students to jot down ideas in English or in any language--just words and phrases, not sentences. Then we work together on arranging those thoughts into groups of ideas. The writing begins with the grouped ideas; it includes writing and lots of rewriting for the ideas to be expressed clearly. Once those ideas are ready and written clearly, then comes the revision--the worry about the details such as exact spelling, right verb forms, commas, and articles. So with that process in mind, let's look at a system for checking the articles during the revision of writing.

Dealing with articles for some students is somewhat like standing in a car dealership. When you or I go into a car dealership these days, we are quickly approached by the smiling aggressive salesperson who asks, "Are you looking for a new car or a used one?" You or I may be tempted to buy, forgetting that important third option: I don't want any car at all. Similarly, many learners of English, once they are conscious of articles,

put them everywhere, forgetting that third important choice--sometimes no articles at all are needed.

Handout 1 is what I use in class. The fill-in-the-blank exercise, taken from a dictation section in the instructor's guide to an ESL reader, is one way to focus on articles in context, I repeat, in context. I can lecture on articles, I can list all kinds of rules, but I expect my class to be able to use them in the context of their own writing. So it makes the most sense to me to begin by working with articles in context.

What I used to do is have the class complete the fill-ins and then do the exercise in handout 2 (adapted from Ross and Doty's Writing English). However, I realized that the class had difficulty discerning definite from indefinite and, most important, there wasn't any transfer from one exercise to the other, much less to their own writing. So one day in class I wrote three questions on the board to help them find definite uses of the article. From there the system on handout 3 developed.

The three questions are:

1. Has the noun been mentioned before?
   Look for synonyms such as sculpture--work of art. Look for parts of a whole like a foot--the body, a foot--the toes. Of course, look for repetition of the same word.
2. Is there anything definite right after the noun?
   Often in a that-clause or an of-phrase. For example, the house that I live in, the rest of the group
3. Is there only one in existence?
   For example, the moon, the wind, the earth, the ground, the horizon, the sun

If the answer to any one of these three questions is YES, use the. In other words, it is a definite noun.

(I might add here that this system does not work for proper nouns of place and location. For a helpful chart on using articles with place names, see Danielson and Hayden's Using English Your Second Language from Prentice-Hall.)

If you cannot get a YES to any question, ask another question: Is it a count noun? In other words, can you have more than one in the context? Count nouns are easier to find than non-count nouns. However, recognizing categories of non-count nouns is useful. The appendix in Ross and Doty's Writing English (Harper and Row) divides non-count nouns into the following groups: abstractions, substances (food and non-food), collections (inanimate and animate), phenomena and forces of nature, and finally,areas of study and activity. Your students need to be made aware that some nouns can be both count and noncount. Consider opportunity in these sentences:

Opportunity knocks only once. (non-count, abstraction)
vs. She had an opportunity to travel. (count)

or war in:

War is disruptive. (non-count)
vs. Several wars have been fought since 1950. (count)

Sometimes the nouns have significantly different meanings:

My work is interesting. (non-count)
vs. Do you like to look at works of art? (count)
Inez likes to eat corn. (non-count)
vs. Some people get corns on their feet. (count)

If the answer to the question, "Is the noun a count noun?" is NO, then use no article at all. If the answer is YES, ask another question, "Is it singular?" If the answer is NO, use no article at all. If the answer is YES, use a or an.

Let's look at handout 1 and see how the system works. In line 5 dried animal skins:

1. Has it been mentioned before? NO
2. Is there anything definite right after it? NO
3. Is there only one in existence? NO

Because all three questions result in NO, go on to the next question.

4. Is it a count noun? YES Therefore, ask another question.
5. Is it singular? NO Therefore, use no article.

In line 15 ground:

1. Has it been mentioned before? NO
2. Is there anything definite right after it? NO
3. Is there only one in existence? YES Therefore, use the.

In line 15 unusual technique:

1. Has it been mentioned before? NO
2. Is there anything definite right after it? NO
3. Is there only one in existence? NO

Because the answers to all three are NO, ask the next question.

4. Is it a count noun? YES Ask one more question.
5. Is it singular? YES Therefore, use an. Notice that the use of an depends on the vowel sound of the next word, not the spelling. For example, compare the sounds in uncle vs. university. Uncle begins with a vowel sound, resulting in an while university begins with a y-sound, resulting in a.

These three examples were chosen for a reason. When I asked ten native speakers of English to do this exercise, they agreed on these three items and the ones in handout 4. The next handout, number 5, shows the disagreements. The fact that ten native speakers did not agree tells you the complex choices that articles pose.

Let's look at two disagreements in which the split among native speakers is almost even. In line 6 material: Three native speaker would answer the questions, "Has the noun been mentioned before?" and/or "Is there anything definite right after it?" with YES, resulting in the use of the. Perhaps skins in line 6 is a previous mention, or perhaps the clause from which the teepees are built is something definite after material. However, seven native speakers would answer all three questions NO.

Of the seven, three would answer, "Is it a count noun?" with NO; they used no article before material. Four would answer YES and move to the next question. They would answer YES to "Is it singular?", resulting in the use of a.

In line 10 realistic pictures: Five native speakers apparently felt that there was prior mention, perhaps animal skins in line 5 or even

painting in line 2; they used the. However, five other native speakers would answer NO to the first three questions, answer "Is it a count noun?" with YES, and move on to "Is it singular?" Because pictures is plural, they chose to use no article at all.

One point seems important. While all native speakers did not agree on which article to use, if any at all, each native speaker's choice can be explained. The key, however, is to recognize that context and prior knowledge make a difference in the debatable areas. This system can help a speaker of English as a second language define his own context and his prior knowledge as well. Additionally, it provides a systematic way of tackling the problem, a systematic way to arrive at a correct use of articles.

Obviously, exercises such as these have no validity if they simply stop here. Because I expect my class to be able to use articles almost correctly in their own writing, they need to be guided into that phase. So usually the second time we do an exercise like this, we use class time to revise their papers due that day. I encourage them to check each non-capitalized noun; since the assignment is usually only a few paragraphs, they are able to check it during class, and I am able to spend time with each person. Depending on their progress, I may use class time for the next few writing assignments as well.

When marking their papers, I usually draw a diamond around the empty space where an article should go or around the incorrect one. Since they revise each written assignment one more time once it's marked, they then can use the system to figure out the correction.

This system, whose beginnings developed spontaneously one day in class and grew, seems to work much better than what I had been using because it gives students a mechanism for discovering for themselves and making them independent of a teacher. After all, I know where my articles go, and when the car salesperson asks me what I am looking for, I know that I have three choices rather than two. I want my students to realize that they have three choices with articles, and I hope that all of us learn when each choice is the correct one to use.

CAES 007
Wrase

HANDOUT 1

NAME_____

EXERCISE ON ARTICLES

Write in a, an, and the in the blank when necessary. Sometimes no word is needed.

PAINTING BY AMERICAN INDIANS
(Native Americans)

As _____ American Indian did not have _____ written
2 language, _____ art was very important. _____ painting
was used to tell _____ stories and to record _____
4 personal experiences; above all, it was religious. _____ Indians used
_____ dried animal skins for their canvases. These painted skins were
6 made into _____ clothing, and they also served as _____ material
from which _____ teepees were built. _____ different colors had
8 _____ special meanings. For example, among some Indians, red represented
_____ east, black _____ south, yellow _____ west, and blue _____
10 north. _____ realistic pictures portrayed _____ people, _____
animals, and _____ birds.
12 One of _____ most unusual examples of _____ Indian art was
_____ sandpainting by _____ Indians in _____ southwest region of
14 _____ United States. _____ religious artists created _____ pictures
on _____ ground by _____ unusual technique. They let _____ colored
16 sand run through their fingers, and, with _____ controlled, precise hand
movements, they made _____ realistic figures, as well as _____
18 abstract designs. _____ time was _____ important part of _____
sand-painting process. _____ paintings were supposed to be begun, finished,
20 used for _____ religious ceremony, and destroyed within twelve hours.
Therefore, it is difficult to find _____ examples of this art today.

HANDOUT 2

CAES 007
Wrase

NAME_____

NOUNS

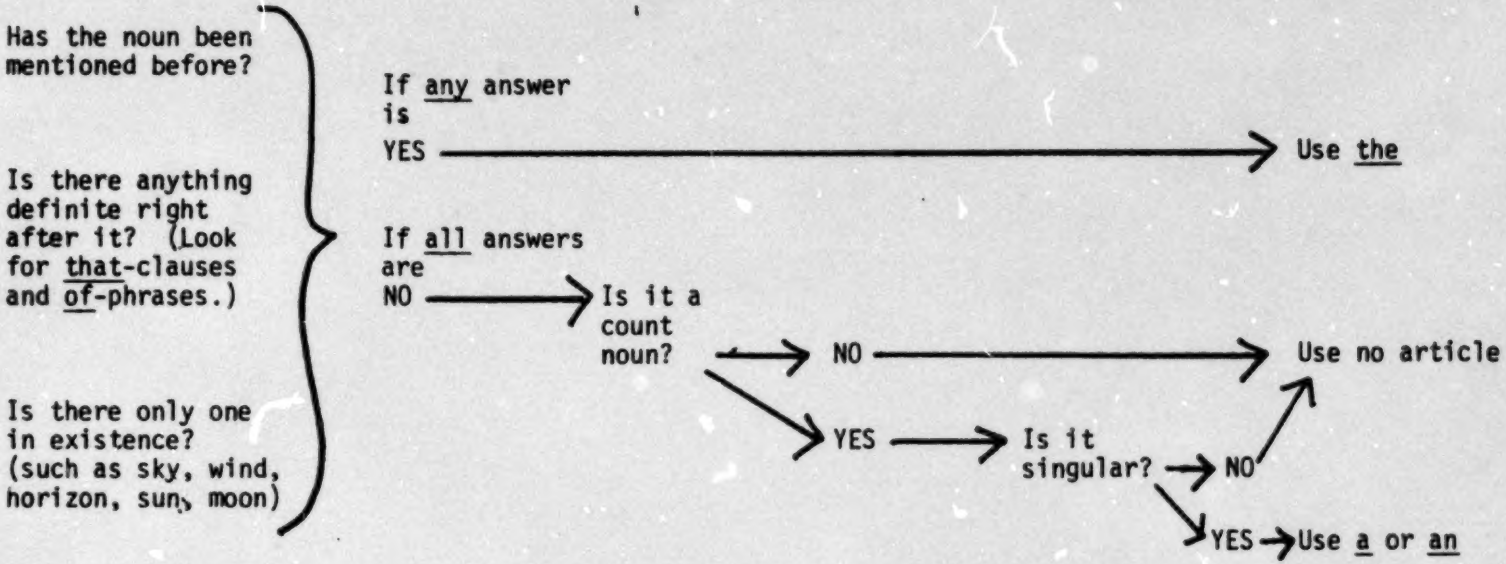
Look at these phrases from the passage "Painting by American Indians". Analyze the underlined word. The first two are done for you.

		Count or non-count?	Singular or plural?	Definite or indefinite?
1.	art	non-count	singular	indefinite
2.	dried animal skins	count	plural	indefinite
3.	clothing			
4.	red represented the east			
5.	the most unusual examples			
6.	the Indians in the southwest region			
7.	an unusual technique			
8.	colored sand			
9.	time			
10.	the paintings			

HANDOUT 3

Judy Wrase
BATESOL-MARABE Conference
November 6, 1982

SHOULD I WRITE A OR THE?


Has the noun been mentioned before?
Is there anything definite right after it? (Look for that-clauses and of-phrases.)
Is there only one in existence? (such as sky, wind, horizon, sun, moon)
If any answer is YES
Use the
If all answers are NO
Is it a count noun?
NO
Use no article
YES
Is it singular?
NO
YES
Use a or an

This system does not work with proper nouns. See pp. 138-139 in Danielson and Hayden's USING ENGLISH YOUR SECOND LANGUAGE (Prentice-Hall) for a chart called "Article Usage with Proper Nouns."

For helpful classified list of non-count nouns, see the appendix to Ross and Doty's WRITING ENGLISH (Harper and Row).

The use of a and an depends on the vowel SOUND of the noun, not the spelling. Compare an uncle to a university.

HANDOUT 4

CAES 007
Wrase

NAME _____

EXERCISE ON ARTICLES

Write in a, an, and the in the blank when necessary. Sometimes no word is needed.

— = use no article

PAINTING BY AMERICAN INDIANS
(Native Americans)

An _____ American Indian did not have ___a___ written
2 language, _____ art was very important. _____ painting
was used to tell _____ stories and to record _____
4 personal experiences; above all, it was religious. _____ Indians used
___—___ dried animal skins for their canvases. These painted skins were
6 made into ___—___ clothing, and they also served as _____ material
from which _____ teepees were built. _____ different colors had
8 ___—___ special meanings. For example, among some Indians, red represented
___the___ east, black ___the___ south, yellow ___the___ west, and blue ___the___
10 north. _____ realistic pictures portrayed ___—___ people, _____
animals, and ___—___ birds.
12 One of ___the___ most unusual examples of ___—___ Indian art was
_____ sandpainting by _____ Indians in ___the___ southwest region of
14 ___the___ United States. _____ religious artists created ___—___ pictures
on ___the___ ground by ___an___ unusual technique. They let _____ colored
16 sand run through their fingers, and, with ___—___ controlled, precise hand
movements, they made ___—___ realistic figures, as well as ___—___
18 abstract designs. _____ time was ___an___ important part of ___the___
sand-painting process. ___The___ paintings were supposed to be begun, finished,
20 used for _____ religious ceremony, and destroyed within twelve hours.
Therefore, it is difficult to find ___—___ examples of this art today.

HANDOUT 5

CAES 007
Wrase

NAME _____

EXERCISE ON ARTICLES

Write in a, an, and the in the blank when necessary. Sometimes no word is needed.

N = 10
– = no article used

PAINTING BY AMERICAN INDIANS
(Native Americans)

As the/an American Indian did not have _____ written language, the/an/– art was very important. a/– painting was used to tell the/– stories and to record the/– personal experiences; above all, it was religious. the/– Indians used _____ dried animal skins for their canvases. These painted skins were made into _____ clothing, and they also served as the/a/– material from which the/– teepees were built. the/– different colors had _____ special meanings. For example, among some Indians, red represented _____ east, black _____ south, yellow _____ west, and blue _____ north. the/– realistic pictures portrayed _____ people, _____ animals, and _____ birds.

One of _____ most unusual examples of _____ Indian art was a/– sandpainting by the/– Indians in _____ southwest region of _____ United States. the/– religious artists created _____ pictures on _____ ground by _____ unusual technique. They let the/– colored sand run through their fingers, and, with _____ controlled, precise hand movements, they made _____ realistic figures, as well as _____ abstract designs. the/– time was _____ important part of _____ sand-painting process. _____ paintings were supposed to be begun, finished, used for a/– religious ceremony, and destroyed within twelve hours. Therefore, it is difficult to find _____ examples of this art today.